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AUTHOR Miller, Janet A.
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ABSTRACT

A survey examined the attitudes of reading teachers to determine how teachers felt about (1) their undergraduate education in reading and their undergraduate reading instructors, (2) any graduate instructors or professional reading educators, and (3) their own teaching strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the study investigated the attitudes of community members about reading and reading educators. Subjects, 52 practicing reading teachers representing grades K through 12, answered an attitudes questionnaire on reading education, while 26 community members (many with children in the school system or involved with the schools) answered a different questionnaire. Results indicated that the majority of the practicing teachers did not feel particularly well prepared to teach reading as a result of their undergraduate preparation. The teachers generally believed their reading education instructors had been capable but not especially effective, and also felt that their own teaching showed both strengths and weaknesses. Results of the community survey indicated a fair degree of confidence in reading teachers among the lay community, but a general lack of knowledge about how individuals are prepared to become reading teachers. (NKA)

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ATTITUDES AND IMAGE OF READING TEACHERS

Janet A. Miller
Northern Kentucky University

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ATTITUDES AND IMAGE OF READING TEACHERS

ABSTRACT

A survey of reading teachers and community lay persons from three states revealed information about personal attitudes and public image of reading teachers. A significant number of practicing teachers stated they believed undergraduate education did not prepare them adequately for teaching reading. While they believe their university instructors were knowledgable about reading they thought the quality of teaching among college reading educators was rather poor. Community members surveyed reported positive attitudes about teachers of reading although they had little knowledge about how people were prepared to become teachers of reading.

ATTITUDES AND IMAGE OF READING TEACHERS

During the 1980s reports such as A Nation At Risk, the Holmes Report and the Carnegie Report[1] have focused attention on the nation s schools and the preparation of teachers for those schools. Several reports have called for reform in both the elementary and secondary schools in the United States and in the colleges which educate teachers. While reading instruction has not been the central concern of all the reports, several have noted specific recommendations for school reading programs and suggested improvements in teacher education. A Nation of Readers,for example, produced by the National Commission on Reading, synthesizes research on reading and presents a set of seventeen recommendations which the commission believed would improve school reading programs. What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning, provides research information on various aspects of education includinag early writing, phonics, reading comprehension and effective schools.[2]

Several members of the Teacher Education Division of the College Reading Association,[3] concerned about the effect of these reports and continuing criticism on the morale of teachers, decided to investigate the attitudes of teachers about their own preparation to teach reading and the attitudes of lay people about teachers of reading in the local schools. The Division sponsored a survey to collect data about the way teachers viewed themselves, their professional preparation and the way people in the community viewed teachers of reading.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The researchers for the Teacher Education Division investigation into the "Image of Reading Educators" established the following objectives for their study of the attitudes of practicing teachers:

1. Determine how teachers felt about their undergraduate education in reading.
2. Determine how teachers felt about their undergraduate reading instructors.
3. Determine teachers beliefs about their own teaching strengths and weaknesses.
4. Determine how teachers felt about any graduate instructors or professional reading educators.

The researchers established the following objectives to guide their investigation into the attitudes of community lay persons about reading educators and reading education:

1. Determine how community (lay persons) viewed the teachers in their local schools in relation to their ability to teach reading.
2. Determine how community members viewed the teachers in their local schools in regard to their preparation for teaching reading.
3. Determine whether community members believed students did enough reading in school.
4. Determine community members attitudes regarding implementation of training for teachers of reading.

RESEARCH AND PROCEDURES

The researchers developed two questionnaires to be used in collecting data on the attitudes of teachers and lay people regarding reading education. Three hundred sixty-two questionnaires were mailed to a randomly selected set of practicing teachers and lay people in four different communities in Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia. Seventy-eight usable questionnaires were returned including fifty-two from practicing teachers and twenty-six from community lay people.

RESULTS

TEACHERS

The professional educators responding to the survey represented all levels of teachers Kindergarten through 12th grade. The majority, 46% of the total responding, had over ten years of experience. Sixteen percent had from one through three years experience, twenty-seven percent had four to six years experience and eleven percent had seven to ten years experience. Eight-two percent had had an undergraduate methods course in the teaching of reading, generally involving three credit hours.

When asked to react to their undergraduate education preparation in the teaching of reading, twenty-five percent felt well prepared to teach reading, while thirty-seven percent felt they were not well prepared and 44% felt that their preparation was limited or of little value. Those who believed they were well prepared to teach noted several areas of strength including the development of practical ideas, assessment, the varied experience they had had within the course work, and a good student teaching experience. On the other hand those who claimed they

were not well prepared noted areas which needed more attention. These included greater knowledge of current approaches, more school experiences, specific methods, work on teaching from basal readers, on phonics and other decoding methods, and more on handling reading problems.

The researchers asked respondents to assess the reading educators who had taught the undergraduate courses. Over fifty percent of the practicing teachers reported they felt their university instructers were knowledgeable in the field of reading. Fewer than fifty percent, however, rated those teachers as being good teachers, very stimulating or helpful. Sixteen percent felt the instructors were out of touch with the real world and twenty-five percent felt they were too theoretical. Nevertheless twenty-three percent felt the instructors were up to date, practical and provided good models.

How did the teachers feel about their own abilities? When asked to identify their areas of greatest strength, over fifty percent said they were strongest in working with the development of comprehension, word recognition, vocabulary development and content reading. They felt less confident about critical reading, planning, grouping, questioning, assessment of students and materials, study skills and language. They felt weak also in dealing with the various approaches to reading.

Seventy-one percent of the respondents had taken some graduate work in reading. Of those who had some graduate reading work, eighty-nine percent said the graduate instructors were knowledgeable, but only forty percent said the teachers were capable or stimulating teachers or very helpful and up to date. Seventy-seven percent said the university

instructors at the graduate level were too theroretical and eighteen percent said they were poor teachers and not very helpful.

NON-TEACHING COMMUNITY MEMBERS

The survey of the lay community resulted in twenty-six usable responses. Of these, sixty-one percent had children in the schools and sixty-nine percent were involved with the schools. When asked their attitudes about reading instruction and teachers in the schools in their local community, forty-six percent indicated they believed the teachers were effective and thirty-four said they felt the teachers were effectively trained to teach. Nineteen percent noted they felt the teachers were effectively trained to teach reading. Sixty-five percent of all the respondents admitted, however, they did not know how teachers were trained to teach reading. Five percent of the community respondents said they personally knew people who taught reading. Of these, eighty-six percent thought they were effectively prepared to teach while only two percent believed they were not. Sixty-six percent of the respondents noted that they believed children did not do enough reading in school. When asked about teacher preparation they expressed support for pre-service preparation in the universities, but indicated that teachers should have either internships or continue their training through in-service work of on the job training.

CONCLUSIONS

While this study was drawn from a limited sample, it raised some interesting questions and suggested some possibilities for further investigation. The majority of the practicing teachers did not feel they were particularly well prepared to teach reading as a result of

their undergraduate prepartion. On the one hand this might mean that undergraduate programs in teaching methods should be strengthened by adding more course work in reading methods--a recommendation contradictory to current calls for fewer methods courses and more academic course work at the undergraduate level. On the other hand, it suggests the possibility that it is not feasible in a one-semester undergraduate course to help someone become well prepared for teaching reading. This would support arguments for internships and continuing inservice for teachers.

Although the respondents did not feel particularly well prepared to teach reading, they tended not to blame this on a lack of knowledge on the part of their university professors, but indicated considerable dissatisfaction with the quality of instruction and the effectiveness of the instructors. It seems that reading educators need to look at their own teaching methods as well as the content of the reading courses being offered at the university in their undergraduate programs.

The practicing teachers indicated through this survey that they felt fairly strong in certain areas, but less confident in others in their reading preparation. Again the importance of a critical analysis of the content of reading courses is suggested, to make sure the undergraduate work is balanced in terms of the various aspects of teaching reading. This data also supports the previous point that it may be impossible to do all that is necessary in reading education at the undergraduate level.

The results of the survey on graduate reading education also suggest that university instructors need to critically examine their own

teaching methods and the content of the courses at that level to attempt to make the work more stimulating and relevant to the needs of practicing teachers.

It appears there is a fair degree of confidence in reading educators among the lay community, as indicated by this survey, however it also appears that people in the community may not know much about how people are prepared to become teachers of reading. Perhaps reading educators need to strengthen their efforts to educate the public more about what they do to help others learn to teach reading.

In conclusion, in spite of all the negative criticism in the media during the 1970s and 1980s, reading teachers still seem to have a fairly positive attitude about their own abilities to teach and about the preparation they received from the university teacher education programs and continue to receive from reading educators in graduate programs and workshops. Further the lay community seems to have a fair degree of confidence in those teachers. Perhaps reading educators need to make a stronger effort to build on that base of confidence and seek to develop greater understanding of what is involved in preparing teachers of reading and to build positive attitudes about the teachers in the community.

NOTES

[1]National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983) A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education: Tomorrow's Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group (1986) East Lansing, Mich: The Holmes Group: Carniegie Task Force on Teaching as a Procession (1986). A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century. New York: Carniegie Forum on Education and the Economy.

[2]Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading 1984. Urbana, University of Illinois: What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning 1986. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

[3]This study was carried out with the assistance of Mary Brittain, Virginia Commonwealth University, Dora Bailey, Kent State University, and Gary L. Shaffer, James Madison University.